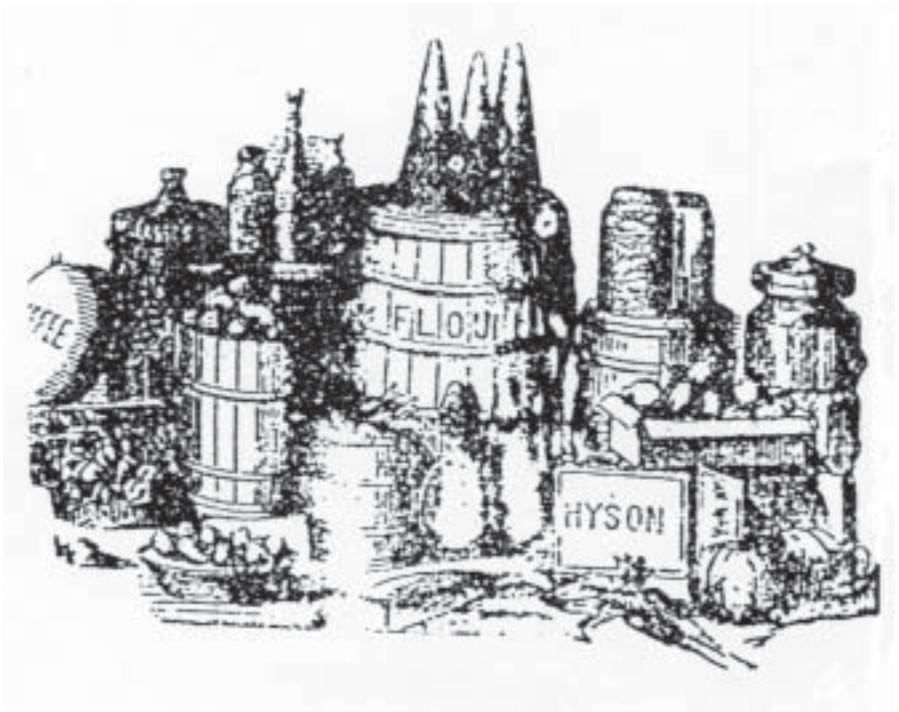




West India Goods Store

Retail Shops in the Golden Age of Sail



SALEM AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE

After the Revolutionary War, merchant ships from Salem reached nearly every corner of the world. Almost fifty wharves lined the waterfront of the city, each covered with warehouses and stores filled with exotic and valuable cargoes. Dozens of ships would unload cargo every month from Asia, Europe, South America, and Africa, as well as the southern states. These goods, such as coffee, tea, molasses, silk, cotton, spices, porcelain, and even furniture, would be shipped from Salem to markets inland or further south, but a portion of the incoming cargo would also be sold to the citizens of Salem.

The very nature of Salem shipping contributed to the mixture of goods found in almost all the stores in the city. When Salem ships went to sea, most often it was not to a single port and back, but rather from port to port, exchanging whatever goods had been found. As a result, the selection of items available in a shop on any given day was determined to some extent by the cargo of the latest ship that had arrived in port.

The overseas trade was Salem's lifeblood. However, at least until the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the city was also a trading center for all of New England. Farmers and tradesmen sent their products to Salem, where they were traded for goods imported from both foreign and domestic ports. In return, these local products were sold in the West India Goods Stores to the citizens of Salem and exported all over the world.

RETAIL SHOPS IN SALEM

The West India Goods Stores that were so numerous in Salem during the latter part of the eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth centuries were, as the name suggests, commercial establishments that included goods imported from the Caribbean Islands (or West Indies as the area was then known) in their inventories. These goods were primarily molasses, sugar, coffee, cocoa, indigo and cotton, with smaller amounts of wine, rum, salt, and hides.



In almost every instance, stores that advertised West India Goods also advertised groceries and were known as “West India Goods and Groceries” stores. This was done frequently enough to suggest that the term “West India Goods Store” was a generic one referring to what was essentially a general store. In their advertisements, store owners offered goods as diverse as iron from Russia, porcelain from China, or cotton from India. Pepper, used to preserve meat, was one of the most expensive and sought-after spices from Sumatra. Nutmegs, cloves, and even oranges were among the items sold in Salem.



THE WEST INDIA GOODS STORE AT SALEM MARITIME NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

The West India Goods Store at Salem Maritime National Historic Site was built by Captain Henry Prince about 1800. He lived in the brick house next door, which was built for Elias Hasket and Elizabeth Crowninshield Derby in 1762. Prince's store was probably first used as a warehouse to store cargo, as well as a place to retail goods to the general public or to other merchants for export on ships leaving Salem.

By 1836, Charles Dexter had a store in this building. It was one of many that served the needs of Salem households by selling candles, oils, clothing, tin, and glassware. Besides general groceries such as grain, cheese, dried beans and even rum, many foreign imports and luxuries from Europe, Asia, and Africa filled the shelves of the West India Goods Store.

The store continued to be a retail space throughout the nineteenth century. Later occupants included painters, a tobacconist, and a wine and liquor merchant.

THE WEST INDIA GOODS STORE TODAY

The West India Goods Store at Salem Maritime National Historic Site is one of the last early shops to be found in New England. Today, Eastern National Park and Monument Association operates a luxury trade shop in this West India Goods Store as part of the Salem Maritime National Historic Site. To represent Salem's early trade period, Eastern National sells spices, coffee, teas, porcelain, and many other items from China, India, Africa, the Philippines, and other foreign ports that are similar to the items available to the citizens of Salem in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The profits from any purchases you make at this store are used to support the interpretive programs of the National Park Service at Salem Maritime National Historic Site.



Salem Maritime National Historic Site
West India Goods Store
164 Derby Street
Salem, MA 01970

Or on the world wide web:

<http://www.nps.gov/sama>

Salem Maritime National Historic Site website

<http://eparks.com>

Eastern National Parks and Monument Association website